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Fantastic Worlds:
Black Feminist Aesthetics in Young Adult Fiction

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Fantastic Worlds:
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Abstract

Fantastic Worlds:
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This project examines how the young adult (YA) fantasy genre is used by Black female authors as both a response to the current sociopolitical climate and as a way to (re)imagine power and survival for Black girls. It looks toward three YA fantasy novels– L.L. McKinney's *A Blade So Black*, Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation*, and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*–all written by Black women and published in 2018 in order to examine how the protagonists of each mobilize resources as a way to gain power and survive. Each of the young Black female protagonists utilize resources that center undervalued sources of knowledge such as emotion, magic, myth, and the body. I refer to these sources as "Black feminist aesthetics." This project examines how Black feminist aesthetics are integral to the protagonists attainment of power and their survival. It also examines how Black feminist aesthetics allow the protagonists to embrace alternative identities, roles, and relations than those typically offered young Black girls. A purpose of this project is to highlight that the stakes for Black girls seeing

themselves in the literature they read are much higher than just representation. For young Black girls living in a world in which their bodies are vulnerable, and their lives are devalued, how Black girls show up in literature becomes important for how Black girls are treated in the world. Moreover, the existence of Black female characters who make and take power in imaginative ways while living within worlds that are violent toward them, offers readers the freedom to also imagine alternative, creative, and subversive ways to live within their own worlds. Afrofuturism and Black feminism provide the framework for such imaginings. The confluence of the two, *Afrofuturist feminism*, demonstrates how essential it is to center Black feminist thought in the imagining of transgressive, prosperous, and equitable Black futures.

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Introduction

In the early 2010s, two social justice movements arose out of the African American community grounded in the simple notion that Black people in America deserve life. Both Black Lives Matter (2013) and Say Her Name (2015) were founded in response to anti-Black racism and violence, with Say Her Name focusing specifically on violence against Black women. In discussing the violence Black women in America face, it would be remiss not to also mention the Me Too movement, founded by Tarana Burke a decade earlier (2005) to address the pervasiveness of sexual assault in America. The contemporary Black feminist political climate that these movements and their effects have created calls for the radical reimagining of a society that does not just devalue but also actively targets Black lives. Not coincidentally, following these movements there was an explosion of young adult (YA) novels published by Black authors that addressed such issues as anti-Black violence, activism, colorism, immigration, police brutality, and sexual assault.[1] These novels include Nicola Yoon's *The Sun is Also a Star* (2016), Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017), Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017), and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018), to name a few.

One of *the most* responsive genres to social change, young adult literature has direct connections to social justice movements. The timing and topics of the aforementioned novels exist as proof of this relationship. Nowhere is this more evident

[1] The term "Black YA" is used throughout this project as opposed to "African American" because "Black" "encompasses and describes multiple individuals, groups, lived experiences, and ways of being represented in the African Diaspora" that "African American" might not (Marshall et al. 28).

than in young adult *speculative fiction*.[2] Many critics, in fact, view the genre as "one of the most important forges of justice consciousness for the globalized world" (Oziewicz 4). In this context, justice consciousness is defined as a protagonist's awareness of and desire for social justice; their stories are "largely predicated on the dream of justice" (1). This project looks toward the intersection of young adult and speculative fiction in the contemporary Black feminist political climate in order to examine three young adult fantasy novels by Black women: L.L. McKinney's *A Blade So Black* (2018), Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation* (2018), and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Published in the same year, all three novels respond to and comment on the political, social, and racial unrest prevalent at the time.[3] Moreover, all three address current social issues such as anti-Black violence, class inequities, colorism, and sexism. In doing so, these novels undeniably forge a sense of justice consciousness.

This project, through its focus on these particular novels, also works to complicate the long-standing skepticism surrounding the critical capabilities of speculative fiction. Nigerian writer and scholar Ainehi Edoro observes how "stories that experiment with non-realist forms stand a greater chance of being dismissed as imitative, inauthentic, and unserious" (2). This project is proof that such claims are unfounded; speculative fiction has much to teach about "serious" issues, such as those social justice-related issues cited above. African American speculative fiction writer Jewelle Gomez also considers how

[2] Speculative fiction in this project is defined in accordance with Sami Schalk's definition: "any creative writing in which the rules of reality do not fully apply, including magical realism, utopian and dystopian literature, fantasy, science fiction, voodoo, ghost stories, and hybrid genres" (17).

[3] Tomi Adeyemi writes in a note at the end of *Children of Blood and Bone* that the novel was published as a direct result of violence against Blacks in America at the time (526-27).

the genre "is thought of as 'fun' rather than as serious writing worthy of critical discussion" (950). She argues that it is this "idea that speculative fiction is somehow an indulgence or that it is trivial that seems the probable reason for its dismissal by literary critics" (Gomez 950). This repeated idea of the "dismissal" of speculative fiction is representative of our world's collective lack of imagination, especially when it comes to imagining Black futures. For Black female writers in particular, speculative fiction offers "a freedom of style and content that is not restrained by patriarchal realities, and thus these writers can better explore alternative identities, roles, and relations" (Schalk 22). The "patriarchal realities" Schalk refers to are realities in which "racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and classist" tendencies persist (22). Outside the limits of realist genres, Black female writers of speculative fiction have the freedom to take a more critical and imaginative look at systemic inequality across the globe. Moreover, this freedom offered to authors is a freedom also echoed in the genre's characters and readers. Readers are offered the freedom to imagine alternative, creative, and subversive ways to live within our own patriarchal realities. In addition, establishing the critical capabilities of both speculative and young adult fiction is an important step toward legitimizing works that center undervalued groups and sources of knowledge (i.e. Black women, children, and the speculative). The confluence of these two genres provides a space for young Black girls to be seen, to be heard, and to exert power. For the protagonists of this project, this is crucial because it is difficult to survive in a world where one is invisible and powerless; visibility and power both serve as steppingstones on their paths to survival.

METHODOLOGY & LITERATURE REVIEW

This project works at the intersection of Black feminism and Afrofuturism in order to examine power and survival for the Black female protagonists of *A Blade So Black, Dread Nation,* and *Children of Blood and Bone*. Critical scholarship into Black fantasy fiction is an important intervention within Black YA lit. Black authors once avoided the fantastic, instead gravitating toward realist genres such as historical fiction or street lit in order to address race through corrective depictions aimed at combatting real world biases. Black YA authors shared this concern, also gravitating toward realist genres. Early Black literature depicted Black female characters who were "infallibly good and who could fit within the cult of true womanhood via the politics of respectability" (Schalk 19). A number of studies examine Black adolescence in realist genres, such as KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson's "Subverting Beauty Aesthetics in African-American Young Adult Literature" (2005); Elizabeth Marshall, Jeanine Staples, and Simone Gibson's "Ghetto Fabulous: Reading Black Adolescent Femininity in Contemporary Urban Street Fiction" (2009); Wanda Brooks et al. "Narrative Significations of Contemporary Black Girlhood" (2010); Wendy Rountree's *Just Us Girls: The Contemporary African American Young Adult Novel* (2008); and Desireé W. Cueto's "What we don't tell, we write: Messages for black girls in African diaspora young adult novels" (2015). Each of these studies focuses on Black female adolescence and most (though not all) consider Black girlhood as it exists in urban or suburban settings. Marshalls, Staples, and Gibson assert that Black female readers of urban street fiction "may not necessarily relate to the characters or see themselves in the protagonists; however, they may find themselves

titillated, provoked, and challenged by the characterizations, situations, and language in such books" (29). Their assertion is not unique to urban street fiction, however; I recognize speculative fiction's potential to "titillate, provoke, and challenge" its Black female readers as well.

Yet, scholarship surrounding Black YA fantasy fiction remains scarce. This is largely due to few Black YA fantasy works existing in the last two decades. Notable, however, Afrofuturism bridges the gap between Black YA lit and Black fantasies. The introduction of Afrofuturism into YA lit seems to have been popularized in the early 2010s following Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* (2011). Of course, it is essential to note that Okorafor does not actually identify as an Afrofuturist, but as an Africanfuturist (Okolo et al.). Africanfuturism is rooted in the African continent rather than the West as Afrofuturism tends to be. However, like Africanfuturism, Afrofuturism also often involves African practices. Following the publishing of Okorafor's first YA series, there was a boom in Afrofuturist YA lit in the mid 2010s.[4] As a result, YA lit has begun to reflect the same value that Afrofuturism places on Black culture, feminism, and nonhegemonic ways of looking at the past, present, and future. Afrofuturism thus leads this project into a specifically *feminist* Afrofuturism, or an "Afrofuturist feminism" as Susana M. Morris terms it, which will inform this project's turn toward Black women's YA lit (147). Examining these genres will allow us to better understand and (re)imagine

[4] This information was compiled by looking at Goodreads' "Black Young Adult and Middle School Speculative Fiction" list. Not only is Okorafor's *Akata Witch* listed as #1 on the list, but fourteen out of the top twenty books on the list were published after *Akata Witch* (2011). Two of those not published after 2011 are Okorafor's own texts. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that Goodreads does not release the demographics of its users; thus, it is impossible to know the kinds audiences ranking these books.

the alternative identities, roles, and relations of Black girls who exist at the intersection of Black culture and feminism.

In part, Afrofuturism was a response to the neglect of speculative fiction to include Black characters as anything more than an alienated "Other." At its most basic, Afrofuturism is a genre of art, literature, and music in which the histories and futures of the African diaspora are (re)imagined. Elizabeth Hamilton describes Afrofuturism as "a mechanism for understanding the real-world situations of oppression in the contemporary world in the context of the ever-present past, while charting the future situation through the arts" (19). Such an understanding, however, has not been present in all forms of Afrofuturism. Mark Dery first coined the term in 1993, referring to an Afrofuturism that centered race in relation to technology and the future.[5] Mark Bould notes that in its emphasis on "bridging the digital divide," Afrofuturism tended toward the "typical cyberpunk acceptance of capitalism as an unquestionable universe and working for the assimilation of certain currently marginalized peoples" (182). Afrofuturism has since evolved into "a way of knowing, understanding, and creating in the world that transgresses the bounds of Western notions of progress, identity, and futurity" (Morris 34). One of these modes of transgression is embracing the alternative identities, roles, and relations that the young Black female protagonists of this project represent. This project conceptualizes Afrofuturism in a manner such that Western ideologies are cast aside: time is relative, African spiritual and religious traditions are reclaimed, Black women are

[5] Coined in an interview with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Bould 180).

powerful, dark skin and natural hair are embraced, and magic is valued as much as science.[6] In this Afrofuturism, Black female writers are "challeng[ing] narratives of authority, recoup[ing] denigrated African spiritual and non-mainstream ideologies as sources of legitimate knowledge and authority and develop[ing] ethical codes that result in patterns of relating more humanely across difference" (Jones 186). Through the prominence of such feminist-leaning ideologies in Afrofuturist studies, Black women are ensuring that the futures envisioned in Afrofuturist texts are ones that exist outside the patriarchal narratives–told by both Black and white authors–so often found in the speculative fiction of the past.[7]

A number of Black female scholars radically reconceptualize Afrofuturism to better suit Black women's lived experiences. Alondra Nelson, whose Afrofuturist listserv in the late nineties brought Afrofuturism to widespread audiences, merges the Afrofuturism of Mark Dery and Kodwo Eshun, while adding a decidedly, and much needed, feminist perspective. Also privileging the feminist perspective, Nnedi Okorafor's feminist oceanic Afrofuturism values indigenous cosmologies and traditions in its visualization of Africa's future. Melody Jue explains oceanic Afrofuturism as an Afrofuturism that considers the role of the ocean in both bridging and expanding the divide between America and the African continent (Jue 176). Meanwhile, Jalondra A. Davis challenges Afrofuturism to take a more critical look at what it means to be human and vulnerable, particularly for Black girls. She conceptualizes the "otherhuman" as one

[6] Ytasha Womack notes that "we like really big hair, or no hair at all" (2).
[7] Patriarchal narratives, like patriarchal realities, involve racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and/or classist threads.

"marked by vulnerability—not only negative vulnerability to the violence exacted on non-white, non-male, or non-property-owning peoples, but also positive vulnerability in terms of exposure or openness to alternative sources of experience, affect, and knowledge beyond that of Western rationality" (Davis 15). Each of these Afrofuturist visions centers what Lisa Yaszek describes as "complex futures in full color," rather than the whitewashed utopias or Black dystopias of past speculative fiction (3). It must be noted, however, that few of these scholars are explicit in creating a direct connection between their work and Black feminism. Though Ytasha Womack acknowledges that there is indeed a close connection between Black feminism and Afrofuturism in that both "were initially dominated by white patriarchal standards; however both are now vehicles that are being used as liberating voices to express public consciousness," she does not explicitly label it Afrofuturist feminism (93). Womack's statement is both accurate and significant for the purposes of this project; Black YA lit's ability to express public consciousness is critical. Even if it does not contribute to an explicitly Afrofuturist feminism, it certainly does implicitly.

Susana M. Morris engages directly with these ideas to define and give shape to Afrofuturist feminism. Morris sees it as "a reflection of the shared central tenets of Afrofuturism and black feminist thought" that "reflects a literary tradition in which people of African descent and transgressive, feminist practices born of or from across the Afrodiaspora are key to a progressive future" (154). In Afrofuturist feminism, the tenets of Black feminism are *essential* to the imagining of Black futures, which is not necessarily the case for Afrofuturism. Moreover, Morris describes Afrofuturist feminist

epistemologies as "epistemologies that do not suggest utopian panaceas but instead underscore the importance of transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy, epistemologies that ultimately present possibilities for our own decidedly unenchanted world" (147). Family and intimacy are especially significant for this project as it examines how shared identities, goals, and trauma foster intimate relationships between the protagonists and others, which in turn foster kinship networks that become the protagonists' families. Such Afrofuturist feminist epistemologies are integrally intertwined with Black feminist epistemologies, both of which figure prominently in the consideration of the Black female protagonists of this project.

Afrofuturist feminism is deeply grounded in concepts, definitions, and terms derived from Black feminist thought. It draws on the work of Black feminist scholars who have long written of power and survival for Black women. This project's definition of power builds upon the work of Ingrid Banks who examines Black female power through the lens of hair. Her findings extend far beyond just power and hair, however. Through interviews with forty-three Black women and girls, Banks noticed that questions about power and hair often prompted interviewees into much more complex discussions of power. For example, Banks found that hair has "the ability to become a foundation for understanding how black women view power and its relationship to self-esteem" (76). She also found that in addition to self-esteem, the act of self-definition can render power too; "it is through voice that black women are not merely victims of oppression," Banks writes (69). Voice, especially when coupled with choice, can then lead to self-determination. Thus, self-esteem, self-definition, and self-determination are all forms of

power for Black women. Therefore, for this project, I define power in terms of the self: the protagonists' abilities to make their own choices and determine the outcomes of their own lives. This project's definition of survival is also intertwined with the "self," particularly self-determination. In *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2008), bell hooks writes about her grandmother's kitchen being a "symbol of self-determination and survival" (43). For the protagonists of this project, like for hooks, the definition of survival is not just living or existing, but being able to determine *how* one lives and exists. Black feminist thought demonstrates how for Black women, power and survival are inextricable from each other.

Afrofuturist feminism's roots in Black feminist thought give rise to what I term "Black feminist aesthetics," a set of practices that prioritize the role of the feminine in Black futures and are comprised of undervalued sources of knowledge including emotion, magic, myth, and the body. This project will examine the role of Black feminist aesthetics in relation to the resources, many of which are material, that Alice, Jane, and Zélie–the protagonists of the three novels I study–need to survive. Elizabeth Hamilton explains how in Afrofuturism there tends to be an "insistence on materiality, rather than a nebulous reliance on concept," but how "the material does not by any means subordinate the subject" (20). Although Hamilton focuses on the Black man in space–the Afronaut–she is referring to the materials that Black bodies in general must acquire in order to survive, which she terms the "technologies of survival" (23). These technologies "mitigate the dangers" that Black bodies face in space, in our world, and in other worlds (23). In this project I define resources as both the material items ("technologies" if you

will) as well as the various forms of knowledge that aid Alice, Jane, and Zélie's survival and "mitigate the dangers" to them.

While the protagonists' resources are, of course, essential to their survival, they are also vital to their community building and the kinship they find from doing so. In their respective works, Toni Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde all theorize notion of kinship. In "A Knowing So Deep" (1985), Morrison describes the kinship found with "sisters" who first fought in the "gender/racial war" that Black women have long found themselves in, and how their "strategies for survival became our maneuvers for power" (31). The idea that survival is reliant on power is a thread that runs throughout Black feminist thought, for without power of one's own, one becomes subjected to the power of others. As Morrison notes, power lies in sisterhood. Like Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins links kinship to bonds that include not just biological ties, but "to communities conceptualized as imagined families occupying geographically identifiable, racially segregated neighborhoods" (48). Collins' conceptualization of kinship is particularly relevant for Zélie and Jane who live among such communities and who fight in wars alongside "sisters." For Alice, however, whose kinship network is multicultural and multinational, Audre Lorde's theorization of "difference" is relevant. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984), Lorde stresses that "community must not mean a shedding of our differences"; she elaborates that "difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" (105). She illuminates the distinct power that difference can foster and its importance both for the community and the individual.

The communities that the protagonists foster are also instrumental to their development of senses of belonging in their respective worlds. In the context of this project, community is the feeling of acceptance that the protagonists experience within a group or rather their sense of belonging. That does not necessarily have to mean acceptance from others; it can also mean acceptance from oneself. Moreover, each protagonist might experience multiple (and sometimes conflicting) senses of belonging in the various communities they encounter. Growing up in Kentucky, bell hooks describes how through the act of walking she would "establish her presence, as one who is claiming the earth, creating a sense of belonging, a culture of place" (2). To hooks, a place she belongs includes a place she can walk. To the protagonists of this project, a sense of belonging includes something different for each. Yet, what Alice, Jane, and Zélie each share is the emotion that comes with being a Black girl seeking a sense of belonging in volatile worlds. Audre Lorde describes how racism, which contributes to the lack of a sense of belonging, leads to anger. But she also contends that "focused with precision, [anger] can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lord, "The Uses of Anger" 280). The protagonists use anger in a similar manner: as motivation toward progress and change, both of which are essential to their survival. Anger provides the motivation they need to manipulate their environments into places of belonging; fear does the same. Lorde urges Black women to "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there" ("The Master's Tools" 107). Confronting the fear (that "terror") of one's difference can be the first step toward acceptance of that difference and therefore,

utilizing it as a catalyst for change. As Jennifer C. Nash explains, confronting fear "actively labors to topple it" (11). The toppling of fear along with their embrace of anger and difference are what allow Alice, Jane, and Zélie to discover their senses of belonging despite existing in unforgiving worlds.

The Black feminist aesthetic of magic is threaded throughout the protagonists' experiences with materiality, kinship, and sense of belonging. Black characters in fiction and film have long been cast as magical beings, though not always with the agency that Alice, Jane, and Zélie embody. In 2001, Spike Lee used the term "magical, mystical Negro" to describe the trend of creating magical Black characters whose sole purpose is to use their powers to uplift white people (Gonzalez). Lee describes this trope as a recycling of the "noble savage" and "happy slave" tropes, and expresses his incredulity at the fact that magical Negro characters "can't use [their powers] to help themselves or their own people but only for the benefit of the white stars of the movie" (5). Scholars who address the magical Negro trope express similar sentiments. Matthew W. Hughey explains how the magical Negro "functions to marginalize black agency, empower normalized and hegemonic forms of whiteness, and glorify powerful black characters in so long as they are placed in racially subservient positions" (543). In other words, Black characters can only be glorified insofar as white audiences remain secure in their superiority. Cerise L. Glen and Landra J. Cunningham note that because white creators "remain oblivious" to Black people, they create representations merely meant to comfort white people without taking care to depict the vast and varied realities of Black life (137). And although these scholars write in regard to film portrayals, Black tropes such as the

magical Negro have long been found in both film and literature, from Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to Morgan Freeman's Red in the *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) to as recent as Mahershala Ali in *Green Book* (2018).

As a way to counter, in part, the magical Negro, the BlackGirlMagic trope emerged in 2013. Whereas the magical Negro is white-centered, BlackGirlMagic focuses on Black female characters who use their powers to better the situations of themselves and their communities. A group of scholars focusing on Black girlhood and womanhood in fantastic/futuristic settings is theorizing the potential of magic in Black female lives, what some term a new BlackGirlMagic. Susana M. Morris and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas consider the transgressive (or not so transgressive) potential that is possible when magical figures that are routinely imagined as white (i.e. vampires, witches, and Guinevere, among others) are recast as Black women. Sami Schalk, whose work I have drawn on elsewhere in this project, examines how we might reimagine identity–specifically (dis)ability, race, and gender–for Black women and girls in settings in which the rules of our own reality do not apply. Kathleen Murphey's work turns toward authors reimagining slavery in fantastic settings; in these worlds, magic-wielders are marginalized just as certain identities–Black, female, disabled, homosexual, poor, etc.–are marginalized in our world. Finally, Jalondra A. Davis observes how "black women's science fiction does not limit itself to the Western construct of science alone" and how through incorporating magic, "the genre provides an opportunity to see, literally, a different notion of BlackGirlMagic, in action" (Davis 14). This different notion of BlackGirlMagic Davis describes is one that rejects how the concept trivializes Black women's strength as

something that is inherent rather than something that is forced to develop in response to the structural circumstances that require Black women to be strong to survive. This is the conceptualization of BlackGirlMagic this project draws on: one that considers how Black female vulnerability contributes to survival and the attainment of power. When power comes from vulnerability rather than strength, vulnerability itself becomes an "exposure or openness to alternative sources of experience, affect, and knowledge beyond that of Western rationality" (15). Such exposure and openness to alternative ways of being intimately intertwines BlackGirlMagic with Afrofuturist feminism, the two of which meet at Black YA.

Before Black YA was a distinct genre all its own, Nancy Larrick's foundational text, "The All-White World of Children's Books" (1965), the first comprehensive study on diversity (or lack thereof) in children's lit, found that the overwhelming majority of children's book characters were white.[8] Of the 5,206 books surveyed in Larrick's study, only 349 included one or more Black characters, many of which relied on and replicated racist ideas about Blacks. Moreover, none of the books included in Larrick's study fell under the umbrella of speculative fiction; this is because speculative fiction was not even a category for children's lit at the time. What this points to is the failure of the imagination in relation to Black folk. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas calls this the "*imagination gap*" (20). For Thomas, the imagination gap encompasses everything from the lack of diversity in children's and YA lit to the inability to imagine young Black girls as the

[8] A discussion of children's lit is relevant to this project as YA lit falls under the greater umbrella of children's lit.

heroines of fantastic stories to the stereotyping, caricaturing, and lack of agency given to the female protagonists of color that do exist in speculative fiction (21-23). Fortunately, the publishing of Black children's lit in speculative fiction and other genres saw a dramatic increase in the last two decades. One of the foremost scholars of children's lit, Rudine Sims Bishop, notes in her article, "Reflections on the Development of African American Children's Literature" (2012), "that what Larrick had labeled the 'all-White world' of children's literature was no longer all White" (5). Despite the welcome change that Bishop notes, there still remains a dearth of scholarship on Black children's (and YA) lit. This remains true despite new recognition of its critical capabilities; Bishop also writes how the genre "has been and continues to be a literature of purpose, seldom art for art's sake, although it most certainly also aspires to literary artistry" (10). Numerous scholars agree with Bishop's assertion that children's lit is "a literature of purpose" and thus, deserves a prominent place in critical scholarship. This project is invested in Bishop's view. Building upon Larrick's work then, this analysis moves beyond simple categorization into a critical consideration of the content and context of the contemporary Black girls in speculative fiction.

Of course, there *has* been scholarship on Black children's and YA lit before this, dating as far back as 1949. That year, Augusta Baker's *Books about Negro Life for Children* compiled an extensive list of "books for children that include[d] unbiased, accurate, well-rounded pictures of Negro life in all parts of the world" (3). It featured books that depicted Negroes contributing "to the progress of society" and avoided books that included derisive language and caricatures (Baker 3). Later on, a number of studies

arose critiquing the racist portrayals of Black children in children's lit, including: Mavis Wormley Davis' "Black Images in Children's Literature" (1971); Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard's *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism* (1972); Dorothy Broderick's *The Image of the Black in Children's Fiction* (1973); and Donnarae MacCann's *White Supremacy in Children's Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830-1900* (1998). Similarly, Robin Bernstein's more recent study, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), looks at the harmful, enduring, and racist repercussions of denying childhood innocence to Black children. On the other hand, much like this project, there are several studies that examine children's literature written by and for African Americans rather than on depictions of African American children in largely white literature, including Violet J. Harris's "African American Literature: The First One Hundred Years" (1990); Rudine Sim Bishop's "Walk Tall in the World: African American Literature for Today's Youth" (1990); Katherine Capshaw's *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2004); and Wanda Brooks and Jonda C. McNair's "'But This Story of Mine Is Not Unique': A Review of Research on African American Children's Literature" (2009). There are also several studies that focus on specifically YA literature; these studies are more likely to address social justice issues than the others, such as Karen Patricia Smith's *African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation* (1994); Laretta Henderson's "The Black Arts Movement and African American Young Adult Literature: An Evaluation of Narrative Style" (2005); and Laura Elizabeth Oldham's "'A Hairbrush Is Not a Gun': Narratives and Counternarratives of Race,

Power, and Identity in Young Adult Literature" (2019). In all of these studies, the sentiment echoes that through the advancement of an African American children's lit tradition, "African Americans gain a vehicle through which they can participate more fully in their textual and, thus, public representation" (Brooks and McNair 126). While this is a crucial point, more than just public representation is at stake–power and survival are as well. The Black YA authors of this project recognize this, using fantastic texts to force us to think critically (and imaginatively) about power and survival in our own world.

Also touching on power and survival for Black girls in the fantastic, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas in *The Dark Fantastic* (2019) contends that "there is something about endarkened girlhood and womanhood that especially anchors the fantastic" (82). She explains that histories of violence toward Black women in the "real" world are echoed in how the overwhelming majority of Black characters in the fantastic are females who "sacrifice[e] life, limb, and love for protagonists fair" (87). Violence toward Black women remains especially prevalent in fantasies because fantasies are more abstract than realist literature. The rise of activism focused on intersections of race and gender in the real world is echoed in realist literature where violence based on race and gender has diminished; violence can hide better in fantasies than it can in realist literature because it is often disguised in otherworldly terms and as perpetrated by otherworldly beings. This means that speculative fiction still has far to go when it comes to the genre's depiction of marginalized identities, Black women and girls in particular, as these depictions have real world repercussions. Thomas stresses how crucial it is to look toward the work of authors

putting Black girl protagonists at the center of their own stories, for how Black girls show up in the literature becomes important for "the ways that Black girls are treated in the world" (33). The stakes for examining Black girlhood in speculative fiction are, indeed, high, for the stories being told about Black girls have the power to shape lives in the real world.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This project will examine how the young Black female protagonists of *A Blade So Black, Dread Nation,* and *Children of Blood and Bone* acquire power as a mechanism for survival and the resources that provide the\m that power. Each protagonist's arsenal of resources is critical to her survival because as young females, even in speculative fiction, their bodies alone are not enough to protect them; each must struggle with a reliance on their resources to attain power and survive. In the end, however, all three protagonists are in fact able to mobilize their own distinct forms of power, channeling the power within themselves, aided but not dependent upon their resources. They do so in order to recreate worlds in which their survival and the survival of their communities is unquestionably celebrated.

This project is made up of three main sections, one for each text. Each section begins with a contextualization of the narrative action and is then followed by an analysis of each of the protagonist's arsenal of resources: how the resources contribute to their power and survival; how the resources relate to emotion, magic, math or the body; and how these allow the protagonists to explore "alternative identities, roles, and relations"

(Schalk 22). At the same time, the project considers what the use of certain resources reveals about the structures and systems of the protagonists' worlds; for the entities with which the protagonists battle–racial violence, gender violence, internecine violence (all tied to slavery)–are also important. Finally, each section ends with an examination of how the protagonist's use of resources fosters her kinship with those around her and/or contributes to her sense of belonging. This is significant because as essential as their resources are to their survival, the protagonists cannot survive on their own; their kinship communities and the senses of belonging they achieve from them aid, empower, and inspire their fights for survival. Furthermore, this demonstrates how Black feminist YA speculative fiction recognizes, responds to, and echoes the vital need for kinship communities and the goal of a sense of belonging in contemporary Black feminist social justice movements.

Section one focuses on L.L. McKinney's *A Blade So Black*. In this *Alice in Wonderland*/*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* inspired novel, Alice Kingston finds herself in Wonderland, the realm of dreams, where she is trained to become a Dreamwalker, one who slays Nightmares, which are dangerous manifestations of humanity's fears. The multiple ways that the "looking glass" manifests as a resource in Alice's story (as a communication device, as a mirror, and as a weapon) are of particular relevance. Alice's use of these various "looking glasses" serves to both reflect Alice as a powerful being as well as to challenge certain violences done to Black women. For Alice, communal power is also one of her greatest resources. Rather than the weight of her community's survival falling exclusively on her shoulders, it is shared. On the other hand, what does not aid

Alice's path to power and her survival is whiteness. Alice's relationship to whiteness–the culture that whiteness breeds and the resources it deems useful–in the end demonstrates that whiteness was never meant to empower her Black body because it could never understand her or her needs. Rather, it is Blackness, in the form of both her Black body and a black weapon, that delivers Alice the most power and her greatest chance at survival. And while Alice has perhaps the strongest kinship ties of all three protagonists throughout her story, channeling Blackness as a resource finally offers Alice a *sense of belonging* in a world where whiteness prevails. Whiteness is the standard that Alice, as a Black girl in America, is measured against; thus, to negate those standards in favor of Blackness is a method of resistance, survival, and taking power for herself.

The second section covers Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation*. In the novel, Jane McKeene attends combat school, one of various institutions that arose after the dead started walking on a battlefield in Gettysburg, and where she is trained to fight zombies, also known as "shamblers," in order to protect white people (Ireland 3). The legacy of slavery endures in *Dread Nation*, and an analysis of that legacy is necessary to understand the resources that aid Jane's survival. For instance, several of Jane's resources parallel those used by slaves; these include song, reading, and folk knowledge. The call-and-response and sorrow songs of slaves are also sung by Jane and the other Black folk of her world who are forced into the new form of slave labor that is zombie-slaying. And despite literacy being banned at her combat school just as it was for slaves, Jane nevertheless discovers subversive ways to learn and read. Furthermore, like the knowledge she gains from reading, folk knowledge–in the form of Jane's lucky penny–

serves as a resource that saves her life often. What Jane has that slaves did not, however, are weapons as well as the skill and training to use them. Together, these essentially make her unstoppable when confronted by those who seek to kill her. Jane's use of her resources for her individual survival, rather than that of a community, directly contrasts with Alice and Zélie's objectives. Though she is convinced she can survive on her own, in a world as harsh as Jane's, many of her resources are in fact communal resources, and she comes to the realization that her survival is more likely and most rewarding when it is alongside others.

Section three analyzes Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*. The novel follows Zélie Adebola as she journeys through Orïsha, a Nigerian-inspired kingdom populated only by Black people. And although white people do not exist, colorism nevertheless persists, with light-skinned Orïshans holding all the power. Zélie's quest is to bring the magic that disappeared eleven years earlier back to her dark-skinned, magic-wielding people. This section examines the material resource–dressmaking–that allows Zélie to conceal her strength; which serves as an act of self-preservation. Zélie's need to protect herself results from the legacy of slavery–similar to that of *Dread Nation*–that persists in Orïsha. It is a legacy that causes Zélie to hate her greatest resource, her magic. This section also pays considerable attention to Zélie's magic: the role it plays in her struggle for power and survival, how it is used in relation to her emotions and her heritage, and how the relationship between her magic, her emotions, and her heritage affect her survival. These issues are directly tied to Orïsha's three artifacts of power: the scroll, the sun stone, and the bone dagger, which are resources needed to help Zélie bring

magic back to Orïsha, but which in the end hinder more than help her. Even so, the artifacts–the scroll in particular–are what guide Zélie toward people with whom she finds unexpected kinship, as well as toward a sense of belonging even in the midst of a world indifferent to her survival.

Finally, in the conclusion, this project considers the differences and similarities between Alice, Jane, and Zélie and how their stories demonstrate that there is no monolithic way of being for Black girls. This is important to consider because it actively works against harmful and violent tropes, stereotypes, and narratives written about and for Black girls. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas stresses, "how Black girls show up on the page and on the screen matters for the ways that Black girls are treated in the world" (84). In addition, the conclusion examines how Alice, Jane, and Zélie's stories reveal real consequences for how we (re)think power and survival for Black girls and the intricacies involved with each: from the reasons power is crucial and why their survival is at stake in the first place to the need for outside resources to aid power and, ultimately, survive. Furthermore, the conclusion reflects on how *A Blade So Black*, *Dread Nation*, and *Children of Blood and Bone* all demonstrate the significance of both Black YA and Black speculative fiction, and how the thread of Afrofuturist feminism that can run through both is an imaginative and much needed response from Black feminists writing within the contemporary Black feminist political climate.

Introducing Alice, Jane, and Zélie

The young Black girls of this project's three primary texts, Alice, Jane, and Zélie, mobilize magical, mythical, and ordinary resources in order to accumulate power, survive, and protect their communities. At times it is the magical properties of their resources that protect the girls, while at other times it is the magic within themselves that render the resources protective. Furthermore, the girls often rely on resources that their oppressors deem invaluable or insignificant. As Audre Lorde famously put it, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (2). Indeed, their oppressors' tools/resources are not conducive to the change Alice, Jane, and Zélie seek; thus, the girls seek their own resources.

Through each of their stories, each protagonist accumulates a cache of resources that "mitigate[s] the dangers" to her (Hamilton 23). Each collection is comprised of various combinations of weapons, totems, and knowledge–including folk knowledge, books, and cultural practices–that aid their survival. These resources allow Alice, Jane, and Zélie to explore "alternative identities, roles, and relations" outside of those expected of them as Black girls (Schalk 22). Alice's arsenal includes a set of daggers, a magical mirror, two "artifacts of power" born out of Wonderland, and "a blade so black" (McKinney 165, 349). Jane's contains her cherished sickles, a lucky penny, reading material, and song. The dead ("shamblers") appear as a resource as well in *Dread Nation*, though not for Jane's benefit, but for the benefit of white people (Ireland 9). Similarly, in

Children of Blood and Bone, the dead also appear as a resource, but one that *does* aid Zélie; the spirits of the dead are manifestations of Zélie's magic, her most powerful resource. Additionally, her arsenal also includes dressmaking (as concealment) and, similar to Alice, three "artifacts of power"–a scroll, a sun stone, and a bone dagger–that harbor magical properties for their users. For Alice, Jane, and Zélie, each of their collections enables them to move between vulnerable and powerful, valuing both states of being, as well as allowing them to eventually overcome a reliance on their caches through finding power within themselves. Embracing their own power and their full selves is also what allows these protagonists to find kinship and senses of belonging in worlds in which the derision of their Black female bodies is normalized–finding kinship and a sense of belonging is an act of reimagining their worlds.

Chapter One: Alice Kingston, *A Blade So Black*

A Blade So Black focuses on Atlanta high school student Alice Kingston following the death of her father. The immense fear and sorrow that Alice experiences after his death attract a Nightmare, a beast-like creature from Wonderland whose presence can encourage humans to do monstrous things.[9] As readers learn, Nightmares are "manifestation[s] of humanity's fears" (McKinney 10). The Nightmare is Alice's introduction to Wonderland, the realm of human dreams. Hatta, a Wonderlandian, saves Alice from the Nightmare and subsequently trains her as a Dreamwalker, one who crosses the Veil between Wonderland and the human world in order to slay Nightmares. As a Dreamwalker, Alice hopes to be able to protect her community as she could not protect her father. The power Alice gains from her new role allows her to resist, rupture, and disrupt death; it provides her with the resources to survive (and thrive) in a world that is volatile toward Black bodies. Christina Sharpe observes how Black people "resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence [of death] aesthetically and materially" (13). Alice's arsenal of resources is essential to this process.

As an adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the "looking glass" in *A Blade So Black* manifests as a magical mirror that can do more than reflect; the mirror is used as a communication device between Alice and the Wonderlandians. Though mirrors can be a site of violence for Black women, their worth affected by beauty standards that suggest "white or light

[9] Though most humans cannot see Nightmares (Alice being an exception), they can feel their presence.

skin and long, straight hair connote beauty," Alice's magical mirror reflects back the opposite (Hinton-Johnson 28). Alice's mirror reflects back her indisputable worth; it does so in the form of those she communicates with in the mirror affirming her worth, and in how the mirror reproduces her own worthwhile reflection. The Wonderlandians Alice communicates with, primarily Hatta and Maddi, rely on Alice to help them guard the Gateway between Wonderland and the human world in addition to protecting both realms from Nightmares.[10] Therefore, when they use the mirror to solicit Alice's aid, they reflect trust, confidence, and a belief in Alice's worth back at her. Presented with such an image of herself, Alice begins to trust, have confidence, and believe in her own worth as well. Meanwhile, when Alice is not using the mirror as a tool for communication, the image it reflects back is even more powerful since it is not reliant on the views of others. Alice names the girl she sees in the mirror, "Reflection-Alice" (McKinney 314). Reflection-Alice quite literally glows. But more than that, she possesses one of Wonderland's three magical artifacts, the Eye, which grants its user the power to "see things about people, places, things. Deep into them" (165). As the gatekeeper to such a powerful artifact that she gives only Alice access to, Reflection-Alice reflects Alice herself as powerful. She also disrupts the model of gatekeeping that white people have long embodied, denying Black people's access to rights, resources, and institutions in order to maintain their own power. Alice does not retrieve the Eye so that she can use its power for herself, she retrieves it in order to ensure the survival of her friends and loved ones.

[10] Maddi is a Poet, a Wonderlandian who mixes potions and casts spells; she helps Hatta and Alice protect the Gateway to Wonderland.

The mirror also exemplifies how Alice "resists the notion that people of color must assimilate in order to become accepted in society" (Hinton-Johnson 28). This is evident in Alice's refusal to conform to hegemonic standards of beauty. When Alice sees herself reflected in the mirror, with dark skin and natural hair, she does not yearn to look otherwise. In fact, she yearns to look more like her mother. Alice observes how her mother's hair sits "a bushy halo around her head, somehow perfect" (McKinney 46). By describing her mother's bushy, natural hair in angelic terms and identifying it as embodying perfection, Alice underscores the value of Black beauty in spite of a society that polices Black female appearances: their skin is too dark, their hair too big, their bodies too sexual. Rather, Alice embraces the trend of modern Black female protagonists who "counter hegemonic social structures by choosing to embrace their own ideas about physical appearance" (Hinton-Johnson 33). By embracing her reflection and rejecting the narrow and damaging images society would have her conform to, Alice creates her own image of what is beautiful and, even more than that, what is powerful.

For Alice, the looking glass also manifests as the set of daggers Hatta gifts her upon her initiation as a Dreamwalker. The daggers, also called "Figment Blades," are used for killing Nightmares and have surfaces that are "more like silvered glass than steel" (McKinney 8). Though their purpose is to enact violence, the reflective surfaces of the blades do not reflect Alice, who *is* enacting violence, as violent; this is despite the tendency of children's literature to depict Black children in violent ways.[11] Rudine Sims

[11] In this instance "violent" refers to more than just physical violence, but also the violence done to one's mind.

Bishop stresses that if "the images [Black children] see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part" (1). *A Blade So Black* disrupts such devaluation. Rather than reflecting a distorted, negative, or laughable [violent] image back at Alice, the mirrored surfaces of the blades, like the magical mirror, reflect Alice herself as powerful. However, the blades do not grant Alice power, they simply draw out the power that already lives within her. The first time Alice uses her blades against a Nightmare she experiences a transformation. She feels a newfound strength: the blades "ignit[e] something inside her that would never dim again" (McKinney 32). That something that catches fire within Alice is her own BlackGirlMagic.

Alice's BlackGirlMagic is predicated upon an openness to alternative sources of strength rather than the superhero strength that dominates mainstream considerations of BlackGirlMagic. Whereas the superhero narrative, or the strong Black woman trope, implies that Black women have an innate and infallible strength, Alice's BlackGirlMagic represents a strength that is inextricable from "weakness."[12] Jalondra A. Davis explains how this new conceptualization of BlackGirlMagic manifests through "ontologies and capacities which exceed the narrow representations of humanity that the more easily celebrated images of black superheroes merely amplify and extend (instead of challenge)" (14). By positioning a young Black girl with discernable limitations as able to wield magic and power, *A Blade So Black* upends such narrow representations. Davis

[12] "Weakness" is encased in quotes because what "the Western liberal humanist project" believes are weaknesses turn out to be strengths for Alice (Davis 14).

describes how "by using the insights from their existence at the nexus of oppressions and training themselves to recognize and harness rather than refuse their spiritual gifts, these girls transform vulnerability into power" (15). Existing on the margins of not just one world, but two, Alice must contend with her vulnerabilities twofold. Though her positions as a Black girl in America and an outsider to Wonderland have the potential to debilitate her, Alice's Figment Blades help embolden her. The blades "help focus [her] Muchness," which is "the part of you that believes in yourself, even when the rest of you doesn't" (McKinney 9). Alice's Muchness encourages her to embrace rather than reject the insecure and vulnerable parts of herself. This openness to both the powerful and the not so powerful within her, allows Alice to better ensure the protection of her two worlds. It predicates power not just upon strength, which can be precarious, but upon all the components of oneself–the good and the bad, the weak and the strong–in order to provide balance.

By characterizing strength as fallible, *A Blade So Black* counters "the Western liberal humanist project, a project that center[s] whiteness, masculinity, able-bodiedness, rationalism, and individualist self-determination" in favor of a protagonist whose Blackness, femaleness, impulsiveness, and community engagement are key to her survival (Davis 14). For Alice and other Black girls of speculative fiction, exclusion from traditional forms of power motivates them to instead access untraditional forms. Communal power is such a form. Susana M. Morris describes how "power sharing…offer[s] futurist solutions based on cooperation and egalitarian ethics," which is representative of how Afrofuturist feminism "seek[s] to uncouple dominance from

power" (153-55). In *A Blade So Black*, Alice envisions a future in which Black communities like her own survive and thrive not through dominance of other communities (or worlds), but in cooperation with them. Neither Alice nor the Wonderlandians can dominate because each is reliant on the other for power. While Alice is the only one able to access the power contained within the magical mirror (the Eye), the Wonderlandian royals are the only ones able to wield it; both abilities are vital as the "artifacts of power" (the Heart and the Eye) are critical to defeating the Black Knight (McKinney 165).[13] That the survival of both communities is not Alice's responsibility alone is indicative of how Afrofuturist feminism "reject[s] the notion that black women must bear the weight of their communities to survive" (Morris 41). Rather, the weight is spread throughout Alice's community, which is made up of Black folk, white people, Wonderlandians, and even Russians.[14] By mobilizing the collective power of these diverse communities for their survival, Alice counters the once pervasive magical Negro trope in which magical Black characters use their power to save and serve white characters at the cost of their own communities. Though Alice's work as a Dreamwalker is to protect both her world and Wonderland, Alice does the work to ensure the protection of her own friends and loved ones.

[13] The Heart and the Eye are artifacts "born from the core of Wonderland, passed down from ruler to ruler" (McKinney 165). The Black Queen who once ruled Wonderland used them in war against her sisters, the Red and White Queens. The Black Knight was the Black Queen's "most loyal and lethal warrior;" a figure now claiming to be the Black Knight (who was presumed dead after the war) torments Alice and her friends (85).

[14] Dimitri and Demarcus Tweedlanov are Dreamwalkers like Alice, protecting the Russian Gateway between Wonderland the "real" world.

Lewis Carroll's Alice was an embodiment of hegemonic whiteness–blonde-hair, blue-eyed, and innocent–whereas *A Blade So Black*'s Alice dismantles the whiteness that surrounds her. For Alice, as a Black girl in America, whiteness is pervasive: she laments how "there were so many [foundation] choices for light complexions…but usually only a handful for her skin tone: all named some variation of Dark. Dark Chocolate, Dark Onyx, just Dark" (McKinney 57). Though whiteness in America dominates the beauty industry and beyond, just as Alice uncouples dominance from power, she also uncouples whiteness from power. Despite power being associated with "super white" Hatta, who steps from beyond the Veil that separates the human world from Wonderland to save Alice, the same power that serves him does not serve her (16). The Veil between realms mirrors W.E.B. DuBois' concept of the veil that shuts Black folk out from the white world. DuBois contends that the veil hangs between Black people and "Opportunity" and between Black people and a white world that "does not know and does not want to know [their] power" (6). Though DuBois is commenting on a Black post slavery reality, and Wonderland is a fictional place, the sentiment can be extrapolated. For although Alice is given the "Opportunity" to cross the Veil into Wonderland, Hatta, a powerful white male, must be the one to grant it to her. On her own, Alice is shut out from Wonderland just as she is the white world.

The Nightmare Hatta saves Alice from when he steps from beyond the Veil is a manifestation of her fears, and as such, a manifestation of whiteness. Hatta saves Alice *from* whiteness *with* whiteness. The entangled nature of whiteness and fear for Alice stems from the situations surrounding the death of her father and Brionne Mathews, a

Black girl from her neighborhood. Alice's father died within a medical system that does not care about Black bodies, and Brionne was shot and killed by a white police officer. Such violence done to Black bodies reflects the violence done to Black bodies in our own world, and which the contemporary Black feminist political climates seeks to rectify. As a Dreamwalker, Alice also hopes to counter such instances of white violence. She explains that "bad dreams messed [the world] up. Get enough bad in one place and *poof*! Nightmare…And Nightmares…affected people" (McKinney 23). By slaying Nightmares, Alice aims to save others from similarly immanent and imminent deaths. And despite living within the Veil, she has a revelation that she has the power to do both. Like DuBois, who saw himself "darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission," Alice has a clear mission as a Dreamwalker (5). In order to accomplish it she must reject the whiteness Hatta uses to save her with, a form of power based off a white worldview that values individualism, in favor of a form of power and worldview that center communality and Blackness. Because Hatta lives on the other side of the Veil, he cannot see how the nature of power differs for Alice within the Veil.

Alice's revelation is also based off a power she possesses that most do not: capable of crossing the Veil between her realm and Wonderland, she is able to access both worlds. And despite DuBois' veil limiting opportunities for Black folk, Alice's role as a Dreamwalker counters the confines of the veil and opens her up to both another world and another side of herself. As a Dreamwalker, Alice gains the confidence to see herself in a positive light, despite the darkness in which the veil casts her. At one point, in

a dream, Alice finds herself glowing; "*I'm the light*" she realizes, though it takes time for her to understand that the light is not the reason for her power, but a product of it (McKinney 115). DuBois notes how "through history, the powers of single black [people] flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness" (3). Like DuBois, McKinney writes of a world in which Black folk are a source of light and illumination, and even if the world can or will not see it, power lies in their darkness. In *A Blade So Black,* Alice is proof that should the light or illumination fade, the darkness that remains is nevertheless powerful. For although the veil shuts Alice out from the purportedly "light," "bright," or "illuminated" white world, Alice does not require whiteness to be powerful; instead, she finds value in the dark

In the end, to attain her fullest expression of power, it is Blackness Alice needs. For the Figment Blades Hatta passed down to her, weapons symbolic of whiteness, crack and are no longer of use to Alice. Though Alice believes the daggers crack because her "Muchness" is low, the cracks represent more than just low self-esteem. Rather, their cracking represents how whiteness was never meant to serve Alice. Instead, in the final battle of the novel, the weapon Alice uses to protect herself and those she loves is the Vorpal Blade, "a blade so black" (McKinney 349). The Vorpal Blade is the most powerful weapon in Wonderland, and when Alice wields it, she erupts with a power her white weapons could never provide her. Just like in her dream, Alice glows; light pours from both her body and the blade. The light has the power to beat back the Fiends that attack Alice like no other weapon can because it is a manifestation of her own

considerable power.[15] And although her power is born out of fear, her fear is a strength that intensifies the light's power. For though "fear tried to work its way inside, [Alice] refused to be taken by it. Not this time. Instead, she embraced it. She was afraid, terrified, but not of the monster, not anymore" (350). Alice finally embraces fear as a path to power. As Jennifer C. Nash contends, confronting fear "actively labors to topple it" (11). The toppling of her fear allows Alice to reach a well of power within her that only the Vorpal Blade can help her access. The "blade so black" thus represents Alice embracing her own Blackness as well as the power it gives her. That the black blade is the final resource Alice needs to defeat the Fiends confirms the value of Blackness not only to Wonderland, but to Alice's world and our world as well. Furthermore, that Alice's Black body is the one to wield the blade confirms the value of Black *girlhood*.

The value of Black girlhood and Blackness in general is so significant to Alice because when *A Blade So Black* opens, some of Alice's most profound experiences with Blackness are death. After both her father's death and the death of Brionne Mathews, the losses put Alice's mother on edge, leaving Alice to deal with the force of her mother's worries. On top of these worries, Alice also develops an immense fear for herself, which has nothing to do with the supernatural terrors coming out of Wonderland. Talking about Brionne's death, Alice laments that "it could've been me… It could still be me" (McKinney 142). In a world in which her death is "immanent and imminent" and Blackness can be isolating, Alice's final embrace of Blackness as her most powerful

[15] Fiends are Wonderlandians that have been turned into monsters and forced to follow whoever corrupted them; they are "faster and stronger than natural Nightmares. More lethal all around" (McKinney 238).

resource is also her finding a sense of belonging in her world; for embracing Blackness is embracing herself and what she has to offer the world. Although it takes until the end of *A Blade So Black* for Alice to find a sense of belonging within her wider community, one plagued by anti-Black violence, within her community of friends, Alice has the strongest sense of belonging of all the protagonists of this project.

What is distinct about Alice's community is that it is multicultural. Her best friends, Chess and Courtney, are white; and as for the Wonderlandians, "there weren't humanlike races in Wonderland," though Hatta appears white, Maddi Latina, and Xelon, a knight who aids Alice in her fight against the Black Knight, Korean (16). And despite the power that Alice's resources grant her and the power she discovers within herself, Alice *needs* the kinship bonds she has formed to be able to defeat the Black Knight just as much as she needs her resources. Too often, both YA lit and Afrofuturism tend to put the weight of the world on their protagonists' shoulders, often as the Chosen One, or a similar singularity. The blending of the two genres in *A Blade So Black* has resulted in the upending of this trope in favor of kinship and community as the keys to overthrowing oppressive powers and structures. Alice's community exists not just to be saved by Alice, but to save her, because she is not an infallible heroine, but a flawed and vulnerable one, which is in fact where she finds much of her strength. Alice relies on her community to provide her with resources, guide her use of resources, and be there for her as she makes mistakes (often regarding which resources to or to not mobilize). While this reliance makes Alice vulnerable, it is also empowering to both her and her community. Audre Lorde asserts how "without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable

and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (105). Indeed, Alice's recognition and acceptance of her difference from those in her community is what in the end encourages her to embrace the Blackness that, again, is her most powerful resource against oppression. Furthermore, Alice's actions reflect the embrace of Blackness that has occurred in contemporary social justice movements. With Black Lives Matter, for example, Black folk are placing their Blackness at the forefront of their efforts to end anti-Black violence; it no longer needs to be cloaked under more "acceptable" terms, such as "civil rights."

Chapter Two: Jane McKeene, *Dread Nation*

Dread Nation follows Jane McKeene in the late 1800s from the Kentucky plantation where she is born to a combat school for Negros, and then to the frontier town in Kansas where she is imprisoned. In the United States of Jane's world, "the dead rose up and started to walk on a battlefield in a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg" and now the East Coast (and beyond) is overrun by shamblers (Ireland 3). To combat the growing problem, the government "recruits" (forces) Negros into schools to train them to fight shamblers on behalf of white Americans. Though the training Jane receives at Miss Preston's School of Combat for Negro Girls is invaluable to her survival in the zombie-ridden world, the system is not set up to ensure her survival. It is meant to preserve the rich, white, and powerful.

Survivalists, a faction of those rich, white, and powerful men, use religion as a justification for violent and genocidal practices. They "believe that the continued existence of humanity depends on securing the safety of white Christian men and women…so that they might 'set about rebuilding the country in the image of its former glory,'" (64). Hence, they build Summerland, the frontier town where Jane is sent and yet another system built upon violence toward Black bodies. Situated in the middle of the Kansas prairie, Summerland is surrounded by an imposing exterior wall meant to keep shamblers out. The safe haven was "built like the pyramids: most of the builders didn't live to tell about it, and ain't no Moses come to liberate them" (261). Survivalists believe frontier towns are the key to their survival and claim that Summerland is "a town of the

future" (181). Yet, they do not care if the Black folk who built the town and its wall and continue to patrol them, protecting their white bodies in the process, make it to this future; this makes them as great a threat to Jane's survival as shamblers. Thus, Jane sets out to create a different future for herself and in doing so, *Dread Nation* "challenge[s] hegemonic notions of progress and futurity in favor of a truly transgressive feminist future" (Morris 33). Key to Jane's own transgressive feminist future is her chache of resources, which includes song, her sickles, a lucky penny, and literacy. Each is an essential component on Jane's path out of Summerland and toward power and survival.

The emergence of zombies in *Dread Nation* transforms the antebellum belief that Black bodies can endure immense pain into the belief that Black bodies are more immune to shambler bites than white ones. White people come to believe that Black people possess some magical, inherent gene that protects them from shamblers; Black people become magical Negroes whose entire existence is about saving of white people. In popular culture the magical Negro trope has "function[ed] to marginalize black agency, empower normalized and hegemonic forms of whiteness, and glorify powerful black characters in so long as they are placed in racially subservient positions" (Hughey 543). The Negroes of *Dread Nation*'s America are indeed stripped of their agency: forced into subservient positions as field hands in shambler-infested places, as patrols sent out to kill shamblers with few resources and little training. They are also made to serve as "Attendants"–bodyguards meant to fight off shamblers for rich white families– and abused in the name of a white agenda. As another Black girl in Summerland tells Jane, slavery is "not necessarily" illegal in this new America; there are "lots of ways to pretty

up the same old evil" (Ireland 243). But rather than typifying the magical Negro that is expected of her within this new system of slavery, Jane embodies a BlackGirlMagic that is empowering to her and her alone.

Jane's BlackGirlMagic is distinct because although the feminist Afrofuturist conceptualization centers pain and vulnerability, Jane in fact has few vulnerabilities. Granted, as a Black girl living in a United States just barely out of the Civil War, Jane is inherently vulnerable. However, she seldom lets such a vulnerability affect her actions or mind. Instead, Jane's mode of BlackGirlMagic emerges from her self-assurance, strength, and skill. In addition to pain and vulnerability, Afrofuturist feminism values such qualities because it values diverse ways of being for Black women–though none of these qualities are *inherent* to Black women, but developed. *Dread Nation* underscores how Jane's self-assurance, strength, and skill develop out of experiences from her past and how she must continue to cultivate them. The confidence Jane gains from these qualities results in her rarely being concerned about her own survival; in fact, she is so confident in her ability to survive, shamblers and the slave-like conditions in which she lives notwithstanding, that she has little fear of death. And though Jane exists in a fantastical and fictionalized America, her sentiments also echo DuBois' writings on a Black post slavery reality: "of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters" (139). For slaves, death was a way to return to the home they and their ancestors were taken from. Jane also longs to return to the home she was taken from–Rose Hill, the Kentucky plantation she grew up on–but rather than death being a passage for Jane, it is an obstacle that manifests as the undead. But like

death, Jane has little fear of the undead (death and the undead being essentially one and the same) because she lives endlessly alongside both.

In spite of an intimate familiarity with death, like the Black folk of the real American South, Jane's faith endures. Similar to those folk, "sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond" that nurtures a determination to live (DuBois 140). DuBois writes of faith as it appeared in the sorrow songs slaves sang, which became a form of resistance and persistence for them. Jane first encounters song as a source of knowledge and a form of resistance in Summerland, where she works the patrols along the town's exterior wall, protecting the white folk inside from shamblers. Jane and the other patrols of Summerland sing throughout their work shifts as a way to withstand the punishing labor forced upon them. Their songs echo both the sorrow songs and the call-and-response tradition of slaves. DuBois describes sorrow songs as "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world" (136). For Jane, something "truer" means more than just survival; she wants to live in a world where her survival is not endlessly intertwined with death, disappointment, and suffering. But in a town like Summerland, whose leaders are resolute on "corralling wayward Negroes" and whose "prosperity [was] built on the back of slavery," Black folk must contend with death, disappointment, and suffering as their ever-present reality (Ireland 405). Nevertheless, DuBois' assertion that there was hope and faith in sorrow songs also remains true. The songs are crucial for "lifting [Jane's] spirits and making the fighting easier," particularly the call-and-response element (391).

"Used by slaves as a mechanism of cultural maintenance and subversive action," call-and-response is an expressive form of culture that was central to slave resistance and resolution (Sharp-Grier and Martin 565). Such exposure to her long-suppressed culture strengthens Jane's defiance and her desire to live, which is its own form of resistance; it also reinforces her faith in a "truer" way of life existing somewhere beyond Summerland.

Jane's experience finding, taking, making, and accessing power echoes that of many young Black female heroines of speculative fiction. As Ruth Salvaggio explains, "though [they] are dangerous and powerful women, their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer worlds, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny" (81). Indeed, Jane's goal is not to gain power for herself (though she does); instead, it is to disrupt the power of the tyrannical. She seeks to dismantle the antiquated and violent views regarding the Negro's supposed obligation to "toil and labor for the Good of those God made in his image [whites]" (Ireland 246). Rather than toil and labor, Jane wants to fight, for she knows that she is, as Salvaggio contends, dangerous. She is most dangerous when she has a weapon in hand, her cherished sickles in particular. Jane notes that despite having an entire locker full of weapons, she is at a combat school after all, her first choice is always her "sickles, which everyone in Miss Preston's School of Combat for Negro Girls knows is [her] best weapon" (8). With the "comfortable weight" of her sickles in hand, Jane is virtually unstoppable when it comes to cutting down shamblers and protecting herself (124). In a world plagued by zombies and white men, Jane only ever truly feels safe when she has a weapon at her disposal. Though she is expressly ordered not to bring weapons on school outings, Jane does so anyway, valuing

her life more than she fears any discipline she may face. Jane does not take the dangers of her shambler-ridden and patriarchal world for granted; she is prepared to deploy whatever resources–violent or vile or unbecoming–that are necessary to survive.

Jane's physical skills make her lethal, but it is her intellect that makes her exceptionally dangerous. As a Black girl in a country still invested in slavery in innumerable ways, Jane's literacy is itself an act of resistance. Reading is banned in combat schools because "newspapers and novels are considered unnecessary distractions" from pupils' zombie-slaying training (21). Hence, the parallels between slavery and zombie-slaying become evident. Zombie-slaying is simply a new form of slave labor that has formed in the United States following the Civil War, and though the labor looks different–Blacks now fight zombies for whites rather than work their plantations–the violence and exclusion are the same. Fortunately for Jane, she was taught to read on the plantation she grew up on and she continues to read at Miss Preston's despite the ban. She reads anything she can procure: material found inside the halls of her school or contraband brought in from allies on the outside. The prohibition of reading is a practice meant to keep Jane and other Blacks subservient, to exclude them from taking part in dominant culture–social, political, and cultural practices often disseminated through written word–and to deny them a sense of belonging in the world. For exclusion enhances a sense of isolation, which contributes to the lack of a sense of belonging, which in turn decreases the threat of collective action. Sharpe investigates "Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging [as their] abjection from the realm of the human" (14). Indeed, to the government, Jane is more weapon than human, just as

slaves were more commodity than human. Through reading, Jane gains access to knowledge and information, weaponizing herself in a way that is equally as dangerous as the weaponization of her body.

Forbidding Jane from reading represents an example of life in the wake of slavery; the shamblers represent another. According to Christina Sharpe, "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14). In *Dread Nation*, the wake is the space that Black folk and shamblers occupy as "disposable" sources of labor for white folk in the "wake" of the unresolved Civil War. As Jane moves out west, from the outskirts of Baltimore to the dusty prairie of Summerland, the equivocation between shamblers and Negroes becomes more evident, illustrating how both exist in the wake. Jane discovers that shamblers are being used to power the town's electricity; dead bodies replace Black ones as a source of labor for white people. A hoard of shamblers is held in what is essentially a giant hamster wheel, running endlessly toward an elderly Black man sitting just beyond their grasp. They work in much the same way as a water wheel, generating electricity through movement. As Gideon, Summerland's doctor, explains to Jane, "the undead never tire; they don't need much in the way of sustenance to maintain locomotion, they need only be replaced every once in a while," which makes them ideal for this kind of work (Ireland 310). Both the shamblers and the Black man they run toward represent Sharpe's "immanence and imminence" of death in the wake. Death is an inherent part of both their existences, and both exist quite literally just beyond death's reach. For in the wake, death is not death; it keeps recurring, as represented by the

shamblers. Though they died, they are not dead. Rather than release, death becomes a recurrence of the violence one faced in life. The promise of some idealized afterlife ceases to exist; instead, the afterlives of slavery morph into something experienced not just after the "death" of slavery, but also after death itself.

In order to challenge a death that the world tells her is inevitable, Jane embraces the folk beliefs passed down from her Aunt Aggie, the woman who essentially raised Jane. Aggie encouraged Jane to attend combat school because she believes Jane has "got a great destiny ahead of [her], and that Rose Hill ain't no place for [her]…[She] need[s] to go out in the big, wide world and find [her]self" (104). As Jane departs, Aunt Aggie gifts her a lucky penny to hang around her neck; the penny comes from a woman known for "hoodoo" as young Jane calls it and thus, must be "more than what met the eye" (105). Jane's mother, however, does *not* believe in "hoodoo" or the folk beliefs of Aunt Aggie, despite the fact that she is faced with the uncanny every day in the form of shamblers. Jane's own acceptance of the penny demonstrates her embrace of "non-mainstream ideologies as sources of legitimate knowledge and authority" (Jones 186). And because of the penny's ability to alert Jane to danger, it becomes just such a source of knowledge and authority for Jane. It is also another reason Jane shows little concern for her own survival. Not once does the penny fail to alert her to danger: when the penny goes cold against her neck, she knows danger is near, and when it goes ice cold, Jane will know it is "[her] time" (Ireland 124). Contrasting an irrefutably magical item with Jane's mother's doubt in magic and folk belief contributes to the feminist Afrofuturist world of *Dread Nation*; for the privileging of magic in the face of those who refuse it is an

undeniably feminist Afrofuturist practice. Furthermore, the powerful magic the penny harbors and the knowledge of when it is "her time" offers Jane her own power over life and death and her own survival, which is rare and precious in a world where death for Black folks is so often at the mercy of white people.

The significant power Jane acquires through her experiences fighting shamblers and white folk, combined with her steadfast self-confidence, convinces Jane that she can survive the terrors of her world on her own. More so than Alice and Zélie, Jane is interested in her own survival above that of others. And although she certainly has the potential to survive on her own more so than Alice or Zélie, often without even realizing it, the communities that surround Jane and the community she inadvertently creates for herself are essential to her survival. Likewise, many of Jane's resources are also closely linked to the communities in which she accesses them. The lucky penny, gifted to Jane by Aunt Aggie, creates a greater sense of kinship between the two women. It is often Jane's memories of her Aunt Aggie and her momma at home on Rose Hill Plantation that encourage Jane to continue fighting zombies and white folk. Furthermore, both the reading and singing that Jane takes part in connect her to communities of enslaved people like herself who find subversive means of surviving. Despite the kinship she finds with these communities, she never quite comes to achieve the sense of belonging that comes with being part of a stable and supportive community. From Rose Hill to Miss Preston's to Summerland, and then farther out west, Jane is endlessly on the run, unsure of where she belongs in the new post-slavery, zombie-filled world.

Although a concrete sense of belonging eludes her, Jane nevertheless finds unexpected kinship with those she once thought were too different from her to be allies. Like Jane, Jackson Keats, known as Red Jack, and Katherine ("never Kate") Devereaux are also sent from Baltimore out west to Summerland (13). Jane has issues with both Jackson and Katherine for different reasons: Jackson is a former lover and Katherine is an unbearable schoolmate. However, Jackson is also the means through which Jane obtains her illegal reading material at Miss Preston's, as well as the one who gifts Jane her most cherished sickles. Thus, in providing Jane with two of the resources most crucial to her survival, Jackson himself becomes crucial to Jane's survival. Additionally, Katherine begins as Jane's nemesis: whereas Jane is headstrong with a "fine temper," Katherine is beautiful, proper, and rule-abiding and Jane detests her for it (84). Yet, absent of other allies in Summerland, the girls come to rely on each other's strengths: Katherine's level-headedness and Jane's headstrong confidence, working in tandem to survive. In their examination of Black female protagonists in African American YA novels, Brooks et al. write that "female relationships constitute one of the most reliable safe spaces Black women claim and maintain" (25). Jane and Katherine's eventual friendship saves Jane's life a number of times. Furthermore, as Audre Lorde explains, it is "only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters" (104-05). Jane, Jackson, and Katherine form a kind of interdependent family, one that is demonstrative of Lorde's statement: together, the three of them chart a way out of Summerland and toward a new life in which they can imagine

ways of being for themselves that exist outside of the narrow narratives written for them by the oppressive powers of their world. Their liberatory actions echo those of Black feminist activists in today's world who are working together to radically reimagine the structures and systems of our world in order to create new ones that serve both their needs and desires.

Chapter Three: Zélie Adebola, *Children of Blood and Bone*

Children of Blood and Bone follows Zélie Adebola's journey through her Nigerian-inspired kingdom, Orïsha, to bring magic back to her people after its disappearance eleven years earlier. Following magic's disappearance, Orïsha's maji (dark-skinned magic wielders) are murdered in the Raid, a massacre meant to eliminate maji due to their threat to the kosidán (light-skinned non-magic wielders) king's power. Though magic is gone from the kingdom, Zélie, a divîner (the children of maji whose magic never developed), is nevertheless the target of relentless violence and discrimination because of her potential to wield magic, as well as for her distinctive dark skin and white hair that mark her as a divîner. As a result, Zélie must use subversive means to ensure her survival in order to undermine a system indifferent to her death.

Children of Blood and Bone opens with such a subversion: the domestic act of dressmaking. The dressmaking Zélie takes part in obscures the defiant act of combat training. In secret, Mama Agba, one of the elders of Ilorin, the fishing village in which Zélie lives, trains the divîners of the village–all of which are young girls like Zélie– to fight. She trains them because with magic gone from Orïsha, the ability to fight provides these already targeted divîner girls with at least one form of resistance. But the training must be concealed in order to deceive the guards that patrol Ilorin because divîners are not allowed to fight. Concealing their training behind the façade of dressmaking easily fools the guards who believe dressmaking, an activity typically considered feminine, to be nonthreatening. Thus, when the guards enter Mama Agba's tent, though they hassle

the women, they do not question their obedience to the system under the domestic mirage of dressmaking presented to them. Obscuring the divîners strength in combat behind a mirage is demonstrative of the strength of Zélie's entire community: it is a quiet and hidden strength, but one that nevertheless persists.

Zélie's strength is especially crucial because along her journey, she must reckon with the legacy of slavery that endures in Orïsha, in a manner similar to Jane in *Dread Nation*. Enslavement in Orïsha exists in the form of the stocks, where divîners who cannot pay the king's taxes are sent to pay off their debts. The divîner tax, as it is known, is meant to further marginalize already disenfranchised divîners. Most of the dark-skinned divîners of Orïsha are poor and persecuted: "left orphaned from the Raid, [they] are the ones who can't afford the monarchy's high taxes" (Adeyemi 28). The largely unpayable taxes are intended to increase the number of divîners enslaved in the stocks. Divîners in the stocks "toil endlessly, erecting palaces, building roads, mining coal, and everything in between… it's no more than a state-sanctioned death sentence" (28). To the monarchy, divîners are merely a resource to be used to ensure the endurance of their kingdom and personal legacy; they are unconcerned that this legacy comes at the cost of divîner lives. The stocks provide the monarchy with a free form of labor and serves as a warning to other divîners. For the stocks of Orïsha act similarly to wooden stocks: they are meant to constrain and enact violence upon the body in a very public way–as spectacle. As the only divîner in her family, Zélie understands that if they cannot pay the monarchy's taxes, the stocks (along with probable death) await her.

The violent lynching of Zélie's maji mother further demonstrates how the legacy of slavery persists in Orïsha. As a child, Zélie's mother is taken from her by the king's forces and Zélie watches how, despite the incantations her mother recited, because of the majacite wound round her neck, "the magic… led her [mother] astray" (1).[16] As soon as her mother's magic fails her, Zélie changes from a girl who once loved her ancestral magic to one who "despised magic. [She] blamed Mama. [She] cursed the gods for making [them] this way" (326). In her examination of four African diaspora YA novels, Desireé W. Cueto found that "the protagonists' lives were deeply influenced by biological or *other* mothers who were home to them" (198). For Zélie, without her mother and her magic, she has lost what was home to her. She begins to view her magic as a curse, which is just what the king hopes for; compelling divîners to hate their most powerful tool against him is one of his greatest methods of control.

The lynching of Zélie's mother also parallels the "lynching" that still exists in our own world. *Children of Blood and Bone*'s portrayal of this violence reimagines lynching from an act flattened onto the pages of a textbook to an atrocity with echoing repercussions and modern-day manifestations. Jonathan Markovitz describes how "lynching was always intended as a metaphor… [it] worked to ensure that black audiences were aware of the strength of white supremacy and the costs of violating the boundaries of the racial order" (xvi). Indeed, Zélie's mother violates the colorist structures of Orïsha (which echo white supremacist structures) because with a kosidán as

[16] Majacite is "a weaponized alloy forged by King Saran before the Raid. Created to weaken [maji] magic and burn through [their] flesh" (Adeyemi 10).

king, her dark-skinned maji existence is in itself a violation. Moreover, as a metaphor for racism, the lynching of Zélie's mother is found not only in the act of her hanging, but also in how she is violently taken from her family, her home, and her life for no other crime than being who she is (Markowitz 145). Again, this same sort of "lynching" endures in our own world; today it takes the form of anti-Black violence both with and without a rope. It demonstrates how for marginalized groups in both worlds, Zélie's and our own, "the rules are rooted in hate" (Adeyemi 27). For Zélie, the hate is twofold: directed at her from outside sources as well as directed inward toward herself. In order to fight the legacy of slavery that has caused so much violence toward her kin, Zélie must embrace the very magic that was their downfall, countering the hate the monarchy has fostered in her.

Zélie's reclamation of her magic in the face of such virulent hate and violence is representative of how Afrofuturism is "as much about soul retrieval" as it is anything else (Womack 2). For although Zélie's rejection of the magic in her blood begins as a child, she eventually regains this part of her soul she has lost. It does not take long for Zélie to turn from the belief that it is "magic that's brought [them] to this hell" that is Orïsha in the aftermath of the Raid, to deciding not to let Orïsha's king, King Saran, take more than he already had from her (Adeyemi 95). Despite "the self-hatred spun from Saran's lies," Zélie decides that "no matter what the world said, [her] magic was beautiful. Even without powers, the gods had blessed [her] with a gift" (327). Thus, Zélie's journey through Orïsha is as much about reclaiming her soul as it is reclaiming her mother, magic, and heritage.

The denigration of Zélie's magical heritage is a commentary on how the condemnation of alternative sources of knowledge, such as magic, is a form of violence against those to whom such sources are all too real and vital. As a feminist Afrofuturist text, *Children of Blood and Bone* works against such condemnation, namely through the intertwining of Zélie's heritage with Adeyemi's own Nigerian heritage; this demonstrates the possibilities that lie in embracing African-inspired practices and sources of knowledge as resources for survival. For example, the language used by maji to cast magic is Yoruba, which transforms Yoruba from a religion that "remains denigrated and suppressed in many parts of the African diaspora" into something that symbolizes agency, power, and strength–the qualities that magic bestows to maji (Jones 193). This incorporation posits Black cultures as strong, powerful and subjective. It also positions the dark-skinned people of these cultures whose heritage has been "transformed into a thing to hate" as worthy of empathy and demonstrates how life can look outside mainstream ideologies (Adeyemi 27). For Afrofuturism recognizes and embraces that "a significant part of the world's population believes in spiritual systems that feature miraculous, mystical, and magical as routine occurrences" (Jones 193). The miraculous, mystical, and magical of *Children of Blood and Bone* provide the marginalized divîners and maji of Orïsha with opportunities that would not exist in other worlds.

Even when magic has disappeared from her world, Zélie's own BlackGirlMagic never leaves her; it manifests as her strong-willed, resilient, and daring character. However, these qualities are not inherent; Zélie is no superwoman. In fact, the role of a superhero is not even a role available to young Black girls like Zélie. Instead, she must

learn such "superhero" qualities as a mechanism for survival. Jolandra Davis critiques this recurrent positioning of BlackGirlMagic as superhuman, as well as Afrofuturism's use of the superhuman and superheroes to expand the West's "narrow representations of humanity" rather than challenge them (14). But Zélie's BlackGirlMagic *is* such a challenge; it embodies a new conceptualization of BlackGirlMagic that centers "vulnerability, an openness to knowledge from invisible sources, and a belief in the veracity of these sources that reflects the retention of African worldviews and spiritual practices within enslaved people's cultures" (Davis 19). Although Zélie initially believes that "the gods died with [her] magic," it is only when she becomes open and vulnerable to the knowledge of these invisible gods that she is able to fully accept her power, her heritage, and herself, magic and all (Adeyemi 15). Thus, when magic does return, one of the changes is merely that Zélie's BlackGirlMagic now has a physical form in which to manifest, for Zélie is simply rediscovering the power that had always flowed through her blood.

In the end, this magic in her blood, the magic she is targeted for, is Zélie's greatest opportunity and her most powerful resource; it is also her most dangerous and endangering resource, but it is inextricable from who she is. When magic finally returns, Zélie describes how it feels "almost like the gods have risen from the dead, resurrected from the graveyard formed after the carnage of the Raid" (63). As a feminist Afrofuturist protagonist, Zélie embodies "another mode of humanity and another mode of divinity, that envisions humans and God as collaborating in the creation and recreation of the world" (Davis 21). Zélie's magic was indeed gifted to her by the gods, and their

relationship is a collaboration in which she returns the gift of her magic by guiding lost spirits to alâfia, the afterlife and "a release from the pain of [the] earth, a state of being that exists only in the gods' love" (Adeyemi 203). For Zélie is a Reaper, just like her mother was, which means she possesses the magic of the living and the dead. She is able to call forth the spirits of the dead, which manifest as physical forms made from the materials of the earth. For example, when Zélie is near water, the spirits take the form of water, or when she is in the forest, they take the form of mud, branches, leaves, and twigs. As a Reaper, Zélie can obtain "the aid of a spirit trapped in the hell of apâdi [an eternal hell] in exchange for helping that spirit pass on to the afterlife" (217). In other words, Zélie is able to call upon the spirits to fight for her in exchange for aiding their spiritual journeys.

Like Alice and Jane, shared power is key to Zélie's survival. The souls that Zélie aids are trapped in apâdi. Readers learn that for those whose "trauma of their deaths was too much; their spirits won't rise to the afterlife. They'll stay in apâdi…reliving the worst of their pain" (98). In other words, the violence of their deaths prevents these spirits from having a future in the afterlife. Afrofuturist feminism comments on "the ways in which culturally sanctioned practices of violence and discrimination can threaten even the most promising of futures" (Morris 161). However, Afrofuturist feminist texts transform this practice. Although the spirits of *Children of Blood and Bone* are indeed denied a future in the afterlife due to their violent deaths, Zélie's magic resists this and helps the spirits pass on. Thus, Zélie's magic is useful both for how it aids her own survival, but also for how it aids those who did not survive. For in *Children of Blood and Bone,* like *Dread Nation*,

the future is just as much for the living as the dead. And Zélie's magic perseveres in the face of violence so that all divîners and maji, living or dead, can access a just future.

To King Saran, a just future is one in which maji are murdered as was his family. He believes that unlike maji, because divîners have never wielded magic themselves, they will have lost nothing they feel they must fight to regain. But most divîners, like Zélie, did lose something in the Raid; they lost parents and magic is a way to regain the connection to their loved ones. The king understands how fear can serve as motivation for change, yet he grossly underestimates the divîners desire for vengeance. His own rise to power grew out of his fear of maji magic and the need to control it to protect his family. He went to great lengths to protect his people and he underestimates that those he has persecuted will do the same. Similar to the king, Zélie's own fear is very much intertwined with rage against what the king has done to her community. She also harbors a personal desire for vengeance. At first this rage is a hindrance to Zélie, but she eventually learns to channel the emotion as a valuable resource.

But before she learns to channel it, Zélie's rage often results in her acting rashly, putting both herself, her family, and community at risk. Mama Agba observes that Zélie inherited her mother's rage and Zélie herself admits that when her "anger twists into a black rage," it echoes "a darkness [she] sensed in Mama whenever the guards dared to get in her way" (Adeyemi 51). Nevertheless, the impulsive rage and "darkness" in Zélie is vital to her journey because it comes from her vulnerability and fear as a relentlessly persecuted divîner. In this way, *Children of Blood and Bone* reimagines the angry Black woman stereotype; anger is not inherent to Zélie as a dark skinned woman descended

from powerful maji, but a product of the abuses and oppressions heaped upon her by powerful and privileged forces. Moreover, Audre Lorde contends that the object of anger is change. Lorde writes: “my anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I'm going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity” (284). For Zélie, her anger too is her survival, and in order to reclaim the part of herself that the powerful and privileged forces have tried to crush, she must move beyond blind rage seeking vengeance and toward a place where she can wield the rage she so rightly feels just as she has learned to wield her magic.

As she learns to wield them throughout her journey, Zélie’s magic and her rage are at times volatile resources, often helping, but also often endangering her as well. The contradicting nature of these resources is echoed in regard to the three artifacts needed to bring magic back to Orïsha: the scroll, the sunstone, and the bone dagger, all of which the King seeks to destroy. While the artifacts are potentially Zélie’s greatest resource not just for survival, but to thrive, they are at the same time one of the greatest threats to her survival because they are the reason Zélie is pursued relentlessly by the king and his men. It is only after Zélie first touches the scroll that her magic is returned to her, but as she is pursued throughout Orïsha, she must continue to rely on the artifacts to grant her power. But even more than that, the artifacts are instrumental in helping Zélie get to a place where she can realize how truly powerful she is on her own. As Zélie stands on the precipice of bringing magic back, not simply for herself but for other maji, Zélie’s rage surfaces and appears to destroy that possibility. Prince Inan deceives her into destroying the scroll. Luckily, in manipulating her rage into focus and productivity, Zélie is able to

surmise that her magic's connection to the gods does not need to manifest through objects but can manifest from her own being. She senses that her blood and the ancestors she inherited it from are just as connected to the gods as are artifacts.

Thus, Zélie makes a sacrifice in which she harnesses not just the genealogy that lies in her blood, but her own vulnerability–both crucial to forging a new connection to the gods and returning magic to Orïsha. Zélie slits her palms to provide the ultimate offering: a blood sacrifice harnessed through blood magic that calls on the spirits of her ancestors, "maji and kosidán alike" (517). It is a truer connection than that created with the artifacts because it is tethered to Zélie's bloodline, an entire lineage of maji and kosidán. The truth of this connection brings Zélie to another truth, that maji and kosidán alike "are all children of blood and bone. All instruments of vengeance and virtue" (519). This is an acceptance of all the parts of herself, maji and kosidán, virtuous and vengeful, that leads Zélie to the "soul retrieval" mentioned earlier. The final retrieval comes when Zélie sees her mother again. As the spirits of her ancestors pass through her into the afterlife, Zélie also finds herself drawn "into the peace and darkness of alâfia" (520). It is here that she finds her mother and that her mother gives her the reassurance she was not able to before her murder. She tells Zélie, "You know our spirits never die… I have always been with you, always by your side" (521). This reunion and its reassurance allow Zélie to reclaim the piece of her soul her mother's violent death took with it, and as such, Zélie is able to return to Orïsha more whole than she has yet been. This moment demonstrates how it is necessary for Zélie to reckon with the past in order to move more

fully into the future. As the African diaspora YA novels of Desireé W. Cueto's work highlight, "the struggles of the past generations continue to haunt the present" (206).

Yet, Zélie is not the only one reckoning with Orïsha's brutal past; in fact, most of the Orïshans Zélie encounters upon her journey, divîner and kosidán alike, are also reckoning with the violence done by and to their people in the aftermath of the Raid. Especially for divîners–whose communities of dark-skinned, magic-wielding people were violently ripped away from them as children–in the eleven years since the Raid, the monarchy has told them that the only place they belong is imprisoned in the stocks. Unlike fiercely independent Jane who is less concerned about belonging and more concerned with surviving, for Zélie, a sense of belonging *means* surviving. This is because her sense of belonging is so closely linked to her magic; her magic is a powerful resource, but it is also an alienating one. And part of Zélie's journey to bring magic back to Orïsha is about reshaping the land and its people into a place in which magic (and thus, she) can belong. In a kingdom in which magic belongs, Zélie's power would be celebrated, not feared, and her survival would not be precarious, but assumed.

Moreover, whereas Alice has her multicultural community and Jane recognizes (and accepts) her perpetual position as an outsider, Zélie is the only protagonist to have a community and then lose it. Her resources are what guide her toward new forms of kinship, with both dark-skinned magic-wielders like herself and their light-skinned kosidán allies. In fact, it is two kosidán, her brother, Tzain, and Princess Amari–both of whom will ostensibly not gain anything from the return of magic to Orïsha–who are by Zélie's side throughout her entire journey. It is also the scroll that brings the three of

them together. The scroll is the resource that, after having been stolen by Amari from her father, the king, draws her and Zélie together in the marketplace in Lagos as Amari runs from her father's guards. Amari and Zélie's collision, in which Zélie accidentally touches the scroll and in so doing, regains her magic, is the catalyst for the rest of their journey through Orïsha. The scroll, and the magic it awakens in Zélie, is also what leads Zélie, Amari, and Tzain to a community of divïners hidden in the forests of Orïsha. For although Zélie finds life-saving kinship with those different from her in Amari and Tzain, it is in this community of dark-skinned magic wielders like herself that Zélie finally and truly feels a sense of belonging. Zélie observes how she's "never seen so many divîners in one spot, especially with so much … joy. The crowd laughs and smiles through the hills, white hair braided, dreaded, and flowing. An unfamiliar freedom breathes in their shoulders, in their gait, in their eyes" (353). This is the vision of Orïsha Zélie wishes to rebuild with magic, one in which she, other divîners, and the kosidán who love them can feel free. Yet, Zélie seeks more than freedom, she seeks what those invested in contemporary Black feminist social movements also seek: comfort, safety, and endless possibilities for Black folk.

Conclusion

Alice, Jane, and Zélie's resources unquestionably amplify their power, but more importantly, they draw out the power that already exists within all three women. Theirs is a power that results from their own vulnerability, but also from the violence and trauma they have experienced, the strength of their communities, and the drive within themselves for a more just world. Throughout their respective journeys, power grows within each of the protagonists; they simply need their resources to draw that power out. And despite their worlds telling them that their dark bodies, powerful or otherwise, are not enough to warrant life, it is these same dark bodies that find the strength to protect themselves, their communities, and their worlds. Even more significant than what these stories and protagonists share are the ways in which they differ. Though each girl has a strong desire to overthrow oppression as well as the ability to do so, how each protagonist confronts oppressive forces and structures, how each personally responds to the oppression in their worlds, and how each survives in the face of such oppression differs vastly. After all, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote, "there are 40 million ways to be black" (ix).

The different ways of being that Alice, Jane, and Zélie embody are significant for a number of reasons. These include, of course, the well-worn adage that *representation matters*. It is worth repeating because young Black girls *need* to see themselves reflected in the literature they consume, but the quality and kind of representation is paramount. Young Black girls should have stories inclusive of expansive narratives that imagine countless possibilities for who they can be and what they can do in the world. These

stories are important to counter the harmful and violent tropes, stereotypes, and caricatures written about Black girls. It is also important for white children to read about characters that look different from them in order to foster understanding, inclusivity, and empathy. And it is important for Black authors to be able to write their own complicated, diverse, imperfect stories. Alice, Jane, and Zélie's stories demonstrate how in one genre alone, the possibilities for Black girlhood are endless.

Alongside the diversity of their narratives and the much-needed representation that diversity provides, how Alice, Jane, and Zélie each grapple with power and survival throughout their journeys is significant for what it reveals about power and survival for Black girls in our own world. The power of speculative fiction for Black authors is that it allows them to create worlds in which power and survival for Black communities takes forms that have either not been imagined or are not valued in our world but have liberating results. For example, in *A Blade So Black*, *Dread Nation*, and *Children of Blood and Bone,* power comes from the privileging of undervalued sources and Black feminist aesthetics such as emotion, magic, myth, and the body. Survival is also intimately intertwined with embracing alternative identities, roles, and relations than those usually afforded to Black girls. Thus, through these texts, possibilities abound for Black girls in the real world who might mirror Alice, Jane, and Zélie in valuing such Black feminist embodiments rather than the ones written for and about them in dominant narratives.

The Afrofuturist feminism found in this project's texts is an example of how in moving beyond a speculative fiction that simply projects Black characters into white

futures, for Black bodies, the past can be reclaimed, the present repositioned, and the future reimagined in liberatory ways. Alice, Jane, and Zélie's stories demonstrate what a specifically Black women's YA speculative fiction tradition can do for Black girls as well as for diverse and varied audiences. McKinney's Black remix of *Alice and Wonderland* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Ireland's reimagining of a zombified post-Civil War America, and Adeyemi's imagining of an entire world in which white people do not exist, all place Black girls at the center of stories that trouble white hegemony of the past, present, and future, and in other universes altogether. Bringing Blackness from the margins into the center can be liberatory for not just Black bodies, but *all* people. The Combahee River Collective Statement explains how "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [Black women's] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Taylor 22-23). The Black girls of this project demonstrate movement toward this kind of elusive, all-encompassing freedom through how they envision creative and imaginative ways to challenge and dismantle oppressive forces and work not just toward power and survival for themselves, but for their entire communities.

The Afrofuturist feminist Black YA fantasies of this project also act as timely, straightforward, and powerful responses to the contemporary Black feminist political moment in which Black feminist activists are asking how and what it means to imagine an American culture that values Black (women's) lives. Thus, as Black YA continues to grow and respond to pressing social issues, the incorporation of Afrofuturist feminism into the genre ensures 1. an autonomous place for Black girls in projections of the future

as well as in depictions of the past and present which can be means of changing and expanding their futures, and 2. that the stories in which Black girls appear reject dominant ways of thinking in favor of subversive, unconventional, and undervalued ways of being and resisting that can also change and expand futures. Afrofuturist feminism ensures that these possibilities include solutions that have not even been thought up in this world yet. And while this project does not touch on queer theory, or more specifically, Black queer theory, that is a further line of inquiry that deserves to and in fact *should* be examined in relation to what Black YA speculative fiction can also do for Black LGBTQ+ populations.

In thinking about the valuation of certain lives, ways of being, and modes of expression over others, it is interesting to think about and consider the Black YA fiction that is or is not being celebrated within the current Black feminist political climate. While realist Black YA gained widespread acclaim with the movie adaptations of Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2018) and Nicola Yoon's *Everything, Everything* (2017) and *The Sun is Also a Star* (2019), Black YA speculative fiction still has yet to debut on the silver screen. Granted, Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) and *Dawn* (1987) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* (2015) are all in development with various streaming services, none of the projects have yet come to fruition (Andreeva, Ramos, Durosomo). Moreover, though the genre did gain traction in popular media with *Children of Blood and Bone*'s explosive debut in 2018–Adeyemi signed a seven-figure book deal, the novel was optioned for a movie before it was even published, and it has since spent over two years on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list–the climate in which the novel gained popularity was a very

specific one (Fleming). *Children of Blood and Bone* was published directly on the heels of *Black Panther*, less than three weeks after *Black Panther*'s premier, in fact, and Adeyemi herself has called the book "*Black Panther* with magic" (Lewis). Thus, it is interesting to think about how a Black YA fantasy novel might have stood on its own, without the push that *Black Panther* might have offered. The answer lies perhaps in the other two texts of this project, *A Blade So Black* and *Dread Nation*, which were published in September and April of 2018, respectively, but did not garner a fraction of the attention *Children of Blood and Bone* did. Still, as this project tracks, all three novels stand on their own in incredible, important, and powerful ways despite how the mainstream media received (or ignored) them. Further lines of inquiry might also include an examination into the reasons that the works of certain Black women are privileged and celebrated over others; particularly within Black YA speculative fiction, which has such liberatory potential for *all* Black women, and how that effects the kinds of stories being told.

Nevertheless, even with taking into consideration the limitations that exist within both the wider public imaginary as well as within the speculative works themselves, it is evident that texts such L.L. McKinney's *A Blade So Black*, Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation*, and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* all contribute something much needed for Black girls within a culture that does not always value their lives: the stories of Alice, Jane, and Zélie are important expressions of Black female agency, autonomy, freedom, imagination, power, and survival. The imagining of Black girlhood in the past, present, future, and in alternate universes that Black YA fiction, Black feminism, and

Afrofuturism offer are representative of the vast capabilities of these genres, fields, and methodologies and proof of why they must be critically celebrated and celebrated in the mainstream. Moreover, as is often the case when it comes to YA fantasies–YA fantasies love a series after all–a sequel to each of this project's text was released during the writing of this project. I can only hope that in the continuation of Alice, Jane, and Zélie's stories, that none of the magic is lost and that these young Black female protagonists continue to find power and survive in imaginative ways.

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